



Chapter 1: Methods for Visualizing Disciplinary Patterns

If this study supplies a kind of map, it is a map of an ever-shifting, ever-moving terrain, whose shape . . . is a function of where you happen to be standing. (North, 1987, p. 6)

Rhetoric and Composition Discipliniography in the 1980s

In his 1987 monograph, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, Stephen North told the story of the “methodological land-rush” (p. 317) that characterized the emergence and early stabilization of rhetoric and composition/writing studies (RCWS) in the 1980s (p. 2). With the publication of North’s account, disciplinarity and the modes of studying disciplinary emergence grew *thicker*. Focusing on eight modes of inquiry, North identified his own method as anthropological because he developed insights “from the inside,” that is, from the sort of “living among” that social scientists typically employ when they conduct research by means of participant-observation (p. 4). North’s “ten years of ‘living among’ the people of Composition” (p. 4) constitute the foundation for his ethos; his insights into the discipline, its “language and rituals, histories and mythologies, ontologies and epistemologies,” take root in a decade of personal professional experience (p. 4). North’s approach follows closely anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1977) *thick description*, which, as literary scholar Heather Love (2010, 2013) pointed out, pursues investigative empirical depths and provides an interpretive account, in effect regarding human activity as suited to text-like hermeneutics. North’s identification with Geertz’s anthropological *interpretation of culture*, I argue, provided a formidable, influential model for scholarly discipliniography in RCWS that still pervades the field to this day. Although the celebrated status of North’s book did little to catalyze alternative approaches to disciplinary activity similar to Love’s *thin descriptions* or other methods that are based on textual analytics and investigations into patterns.

Gauging by its reception and legacy, North’s project stands out as one of the most impactful texts of the 1980s on the field’s formation. *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* is well known and frequently cited; it is one of the few books to be reviewed multiple times in *College Composition and Com-*

munication (CCC). And the 25-year anniversary of its publication was punctuated in 2011, with the release of an honorific collection, edited by Lance Massey and Richard Gebhardt, *The Changing of Knowledge in Composition*. Few would identify North's 1987 monograph as anything less than a highly influential landmark study that has since seeped into and even grown to be constitutive of the field's ontology. Furthermore, it was one of the first—if not the first—theoretical monographs to be published in the discipline, with Karen Burke LeFevre's (1986) *Invention as a Social Act*, James Berlin's (1987) *Rhetoric and Reality*, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps's (1991) *Composition as a Human Science* entering into circulation contemporaneous to North's *The Making of Knowledge*.

North (1987) made a direct, deliberate effort to resolve the rising disciplinary complexity of the moment—which he characterized as “chaotic and patternless” (p. 3)—with methodological trends in the scholarly research performed over the preceding two decades. Early in the study, he acknowledged “two major liabilities” resulting from the rapid growth of the previous 20 years (the span from approximately 1967 until 1987) during which modern RCWS emerged:

The first [liability] is that the new investigators have tended to trample roughshod over the claims of previous inquirers, especially the ‘indigenous’ population that I will call the Practitioners Second, the growth of methodological awareness has not kept pace with this scramble for the power and prestige that go with being able to say what constitutes knowledge. Investigators often seem unreflective about their own mode of inquiry, let alone anyone else's. The predictable result within methodological communities has been disorder: investigators are wont to claim more for their work than they can or should. Between communities, it has produced a kind of inflation: in the absence of a critical consciousness capable of discriminating more carefully, the various kinds of knowledge produced by these modes of inquiry have piled up uncritically, helter skelter, with little regard to incompatibilities. The result has been an accumulated knowledge of relatively impressive size, but one that lacks any clear coherence or methodological integrity. *Composition's* collective fund of knowledge is a very fragile entity. (p. 3)

What's clear here is North's preference for “coherence” and “methodological integrity,” timely correctives presumably dealt with by his project in response to the problems of “disorder” and “inflation.” North's methodological

typology with its eight modes of research activity sought to reconcile these disparate forces and divergent qualities, legitimizing lore through the use of methods generally thought to be indicative of rigorous research. North's work captured the criticality of the moment: the emerging field's phase-shift from an era of lore and all of its attachments and associations—many of them operating as a patchwork of idiosyncratic anecdotes and local insights, spanning from either 1949 or 1963 to 1987—to an era of comparable stability, legitimacy, and professionalization, which included the rise of graduate programs, tenure lines, specialization, and a greater likelihood for intra-discipline insularity or pocketing. Lore did not dissipate after North placed a spotlight on it, but a greater stratification was demonstrable and with it new trends toward specialization in the field. In 1987, these were contentious matters and serious concerns after more than two decades of helter-skelter disciplinary emergence. Had RCWS grown too large, too fast? What theories, methods, and practices cohered in this domain of study? Would it be possible to affirm the legitimacy of practitioners' tacit knowledge while at the same time strengthening methodological integrity?

North's was not the first account that sought to refine thinking about the inner workings of RCWS, but it has arguably been the one whose narrative of the field is best known and most widely heralded as *the story* for a number of reasons. I will return to this in a moment. But first I want to fold North's narrative into a broader classification of scholarly efforts in the 1980s and early 1990s to deal with disciplinarity—with the emergence, formation, and stabilization of the field we call rhetoric and composition/writing studies—a broader classification I will refer to as *discipliniography*, the writing of the discipline. In *Authoring a Discipline*, a study of nine scholarly journals in RCWS from 1950 to 1990, Maureen Daly Goggin (2000) referred to journal editors and article authors as *disciplinographers*—as those who produced the field with their scholarship. *Authoring a Discipline* is a periodic history of the development of key journals over a 40-year period; I will discuss Goggin's work in greater depth in Chapter Four. For now, I simply want to expand on the idea of discipliniography as a genre that both writes the field and is written by scholars in the field, and as such, a genre that is responsive to the growth of the field and its changing, contested state(s).

This book attempts to offer a partial intervention into the long line of disciplinary accounts of RCWS by writing the field using distant, thin methods as well as methods devised to discern patterns in large collections of words, citations, and geographic locations. As such, this work stands apart from most attempts to write the discipline that have come before it. Early accounts, including Janet Emig's 1977 (1983 reprint) essay "The Tacit Tradition: The Inevitability of a Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Writing Research," Richard

Fulkerson's 1979 CCC essay "Four Philosophies of Composition," as well as his article a decade later, "Composition Theory in the Eighties" (1990), James A. Berlin's 1982 *College English* essay "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," and Janice Lauer's 1984 *Rhetoric Review* essay "Composition Studies: Dappled Discipline," attempted to explain the field's complexity by introducing taxonomies for organizing philosophical or pedagogical epistemologies or for explaining the extradisciplinary influences that, in part, justify a sense of patchiness and diffuseness among those who identify with RCWS. Each of these accounts of the discipline is significant in its own right, and each is a noteworthy precursor to the book-length accounts of the field by North and Phelps that were published late in the 1980s. Still other articles subsequent to the 1980s, such as Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt's 1993 *Written Communication* article "Where Did Composition Studies Come From? An Intellectual History," indicated that the formal genre of disciplinography continued. And, there are still other, more recent attempts—a class of articles and monographs about the discipline that have done much to theorize and historicize the conditions contributing to its emergence while also offering newcomers devices for gaining traction on what has passed that can explain contemporary and future developments. The point here is not so much to critique disciplinography (though it does warrant asking whether such accounts stabilized the field and therefore reified certain lingering conceptions of it) but rather to acknowledge that this sort of work—the chronicling of the discipline—has always been a part of RCWS and that, from early on, disciplinography reflected methodological influence from Geertz's thick description. As Massey and Gebhardt attested in the introduction to their volume, ethnography is "our leading empirical scholarship" (p. 8).

Collectively, disciplinographical accounts seemed to peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s, shortly after the publication of North's (1987) *Making of Knowledge* and perhaps culminating with Susan Miller's (1993) *Textual Carnivals* or with Donna Burns Phillips, Ruth Greenberg, and Sharon Gibson's (1993) CCC article "*College Composition and Communication: Chronicling a Discipline's Genesis*." Numerous disciplinographies have been written and published since this moment of criticality, but I would argue that many of the disciplinographies attempted after 1993 have been hard-pressed to account for the fullness and richness of this expanding disciplinary complexity subsequent to 1987. As a result, we find more highly selective accounts of the discipline that zero in on a particular historical moment (viz., Joseph Harris's [1997] *A Teaching Subject*, which examined key tenets of disciplinarity through pedagogical imperatives advanced in the 1966 Dartmouth Conference), on sites (viz., Anne Ruggles Gere's [1997] *Intimate Practices*, which ex-

amined constructs of intimacy and literacy in women's clubs), on historical precursors to the post-WWII emergence of the field (viz., Thomas Masters's [2004] *Practicing Writing* and Sharon Crowley's [1998] *Composition in the University*), and on missed opportunities (viz., Geoffrey Sirc's [2002] *English Composition as a Happening*, which argued for reimagining the field according to the performances of avant-garde artists, and Jeff Rice's [2007] *The Rhetoric of Cool*, which called for re-thinking the relationship of new media and composition by way of Marshall McLuhan and others).

There are more accounts to consider, but this list should be adequate to underscore what I am suggesting: Many disciplinary accounts, since the moment of criticality I want to locate in 1987, have become more specialized. They have done well to showcase the chaotic and patternless nature of the field's emergence and have simultaneously shown the challenges of aggregating dappledness into broadly inclusive, yet coherent, accounts. In most cases, these overt disciplinographies, by which I mean the explicit attempts to write the discipline (as mildly distinct from the implicit authoring of the discipline Goggin wrote about that happens at the hands of journal editors and authors of scholarly articles) narrowed in scope and in focus. While North called for methodological pluralism in his 1987 monograph, what followed included disciplinographic pluralism that remained beholden to anthropological ways of knowing—that is, approaches that were experientially interpretive and thick-descriptive. The field's proper emergence—this moment of criticality and phase shift I have mentioned—also ushered in a profound expansion of the field that we are still witnessing and enacting decades later. This project aims to offer a modest, contemporary response to this rising complexity, a response that urges the development of distant reading and thin description methods and expands our means of abstracting and modeling patterned images of the field's development since 1987, patterned images that will render intelligible the disciplinary materials and activities that have rapidly piled up over the past three decades.

The key proposition here is that 1987 should be regarded as a moment of criticality, after which accounts of the totality of the discipline grew ever more narrow, focused, and specialized. Hereafter, no single perspective or viewpoint could sufficiently grapple with the whole field—the discipline—as a totality of practices and activities in addition to the published record. Perhaps this observation is commonplace, so plain and so widely understood that it hardly needs to be posed as insightful once again. Yet the publication of North's monograph, followed shortly thereafter by Phelps's (1991) *Composition as a Human Science*, is not all there is to my contention that something profound happened at this transformative moment for the field. At the same time the field's "social fabric" was, according to Goggin, gaining strength

(2000, p. 178); the field was creeping sidelong into other forays, interests, and specialized niches. In the following section, I will explain how formal changes to *College Composition and Communication* strengthen the case I set out for marking 1987 as a moment of criticality.

Disciplinary Catalysts: Restructuring and Accumulation

When in 1987 Richard Gebhardt assumed editorial responsibilities for *College Composition and Communication*, two significant changes to the journal were already underway. First, the journal was switching from the use of endnotes to the use of a works cited page as defined by the Modern Language Association (MLA). Second, the review of article submissions was, for the first time, conducted using a blind peer review system. While these alterations lent a sense of modernization and rigor to the journal, they were not only indications that the field itself was responsive to contemporary developments in academic publishing but also that the field was burgeoning and that its rising complexity would require new processes and new apparatuses for selecting, presenting, and circulating the journal's content.

Changing from a system of end notes to works cited was to be expected for such a prominent journal as CCC, given that several other journals in the field were making the same change at this time. *JAC*, for instance, used endnotes through the end of 1986 before applying MLA works cited format for bibliographic citation in 1987. *College English* and *Rhetoric Review* made the changeover early in 1985, and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* adopted the MLA works cited style in the summer of 1986 (16.3).

Although this initial change appears at first glance to be a minor modification to the formal arrangement of reference lists, the new design for formal citations can also be understood as restructuring disciplinary discourse in ways that complement network sense. The previous system of endnotes functioned like a highly localized (i.e., article-scale) trail of only internally relevant crumbs, ordered sequentially in direct correspondence to the linear, start-to-finish progression of reading an article from its first word to its last. Each notes reference was numbered, and while this numbering preserved a logical system for cross-referencing notes and citations that appeared at the end of the article, it made the external tracing of references difficult. Independent of the article, the entangled thicket of notes and references at the end of the article was in many cases too dense, too contingent upon the context of the reference, and often even further obscured by systems of abbreviation used to use as little page space as necessary for appending the notes. The collection of listed references could not easily be glanced at in a predictably ordered, coherent location.

The adoption of MLA formatting meant for the journal articles that the works cited for a given article was listed separately from the endnotes. Notes now appeared at the end, followed by a separate listing of references appearing in the article, and they included specific design features such as alphabetical ordering by the author's last name and hanging indent, which would make the listing of references more readily accessible. With this change, the works cited could be, in some sense, *read* independent of the article. And although the system has its limitations, which include the flattening out of the extent of each reference's bearing in the article itself, the MLA works cited feature was an abstraction of the article. Works cited listings now operated as an orderly yet thin description of the article itself—a bibliographic apparatus that functioned synecdochally (part standing in for whole) and that lent itself to systematic treatments as regularized strings of data. Further, such lists made possible one kind of distant reading of the scholarly article. For illustration, consider the differences between the notes appearing at the end of T.Y. Booth's 1986 CCC article, "I. A. Richards and the Composing Process" (Fig. 2), and the works cited listed at the end of William F. Irmischer's, "Finding a Comfortable Identity" (Fig. 3), which was published in the next issue.

Notes

1. I. A. Richards, *So Much Nearer: Essays Toward a World English* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 118. This book is referred to subsequently in the text as *SMN*.
2. Adrian Akmajian, Richard A. Demers, and Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), p. 228.
3. Akmajian, *Linguistics*, pp. 146, 186.
4. Wilma R. Ebbitt and David R. Ebbitt (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1982), p. 457. The above sentence about wind, trees, and ice is from p. 496, italics not reproduced.
5. Richards took the token-Type terminology from C. S. Peirce, calling each of the individual seeable letters on the page a "token" of one of the "Types" which are designated when we say there are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. Although all of us, I assert grandly, can see the distinction once it is pointed out, the difficulties of developing a philosophy which adequately deals with it have been recognized since at least as far back as the time of Socrates. See I. A. Richards, *Beyond* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), pp. 5-13.
6. Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, "Huge March to Embody Dream of Peace," and William F. Buckley Jr., "Convict's Views on Drugs Ring Truer than Solon's," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3 September 1985, Sec. A, p. 14.

Figure 2. CCC Notes in 1986. The listing of endnotes appearing after T.Y. Booth's 1986 article "I.A. Richards and the Composing Process" shows the way such notes followed the syntagmatic logic of the conventional reading of the article itself. Endnotes like these were used from the inception of College Composition and Communication in 1949 through 1986.

As the field stabilized, scholarship drew on a greater breadth of references. An attempt to visualize that shifting breadth is featured in Chapter Four, using a series of citation frequency graphs. In turn, vestiges of conversations played out in journals whose sponsorship was more explicitly grounded in shared disciplinary concerns than ever before. These concerns surfaced with great fre-

quency in the themes of conferences and in conference keynote addresses. As a consequence of growing disciplinary engagement, there was more citation-appropriate material to work with. Goggin indicated that while there were 13 journals founded between 1950 and 1980 in RCWS, 10 more journals were founded in the 1980s alone. The separation of the works cited list at the end of each article made it much easier to trace these conversations—to glance them over and quickly apprehend connections, recurrence, and familiarity in the list: in effect, to forge a network sense of the emerging field. This would be true both for those who wanted to cross-reference an in-text citation with the works cited listing while reading the article and also for those who look over the works cited listing before reading the article. The journal now included independently organized data on the scale of individual articles—something systematic that readers of an article could, in a glance, use to know something about the article itself and its relationships to other published work. The network of citations was presented in a more orderly fashion than before; readers could more readily apprehend it. With this design adaptation, the journal as a record of scholarly activity became more portable; it was better suited for the circulation of professional scholarship, and it remains in place today, nearly two decades into the 21st century.

Works Cited

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Figure 3. CCC Works Cited in 1987. The works cited listing following William F. Irmscher's "Finding a Comfortable Identity" shows the conventional listing endorsed by the Modern Language Association in the late 1980s. Rather than following a sequential logic through the article itself, works cited lists introduced a substitutive logic. Each source referenced in the article would appear just once in a comprehensive listing arranged in alphanumeric order.

A second change to accompany Gebhardt's tenure as editor of CCC, the journal with a subscription circulation second only to *College English* among

those journals identified with RCWS, was to introduce a double-blind peer review process for the screening of manuscript submissions. Before blind peer review, reviewers knew full well who was submitting an article; identities were not obscured, thus leaving uncertain just how much knowledge (familiarity, kinship, etc.) beyond the article weighed on the assessment of it as scholarship appropriate for publication in CCC. When a pool of readers, writers, editors, and reviewers is relatively close-knit, blind peer review would have different consequences, perhaps beset by familiarity biases. But as the field diversified, as graduate programs sprouted and the number of tenure track lines increased, there would be not only a greater number of article submissions but also a greater range of institutional perspectives, methodological preferences, and theoretical orientations as well as a lower rate of acceptance for publication. Blind peer review, for a prominent journal in an emerging field like RCWS, indicates a transition from this relatively familiar cluster of active, known participants to a broader, more heterogeneous (and potentially contentious, where representation in powerful platforms like an international journal is at stake) formation. This might also be framed metaphorically as a shift from the field as small, tight-knit cluster to a more complex constellation, partitioned and intersected by a number of attributes, including the chief cause for this *moment of criticality*: Everyone no longer knew everyone else.

The blind peer review system for CCC in 1987 also introduced a condition of scarcity that made the content of the journal appear at once to be rarer and more precious. In his inaugural editor's note (1987), Gebhardt wrote that "over two hundred men and women at universities, liberal arts colleges, and two-year colleges in the United States, Canada, and Australia sent me submissions" (p. 19). Even if this approximation referred to every genre included in the journal, from articles to staffroom interchanges and book reviews, it would indicate an acceptance rate of, at most, just more than 40% for the 1986 publishing cycle. Publication in CCC was becoming more competitive—the inevitable result of the transformation of the discipline demonstrated at this time.

Admittedly over-identifying 1987 as the stand-out year in the rising disciplinary status—from emergence to stability—risks eclipsing myriad additional transformative moments in the field's rich history. Certainly a number of other factors and happenings before and after 1987 loosen the somewhat arbitrary temporal boundaries of any given year. For example, on a panel titled "Chorographies of Composition" at the 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication, I spoke about 1987 as a moment of criticality, and, in addition, Jeff Rice identified 1949 as a key moment, James Brown pinpointed 1995, Michael McGinnis, 1969, and David Grant, 1994. Across such a long and divergent disciplinary archipelago, these and many additional moments are defensible as catalytic or as points marking a distinctive change. Keying

in on 1987, however, my purpose has been to survey *some* of the disciplinary activities that substantiate the mid-1980s as the beginning point for data sets behind the data-visual models featured in Chapters Three and Four. Because I introduce and ultimately promote distant reading and thin description as methods for apprehending and understanding selected aspects of RCWS since 1987, I contend that the factors I have outlined so far explain the time-frame within which I am working. As I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, many of the disciplinographic methods adopted in 1987 are no longer wholly sufficient for deriving generalities about the field 30 years hence. The other conditions I have discussed so far—a burst of disciplinography related to this moment of criticality, the formal adoption of MLA Works Cited format for listing the materials referenced in a scholarly article, and the transition to anonymous peer review—coalesce to point out that with this moment of criticality, the discipline was faced with new opportunities and new challenges, some of which remain unaddressed, or perhaps under-addressed, by the field at large. Since 1987, the field of RCWS continued to witness unbridled change, presenting us with what Kathleen Yancey identified in her 2004 CCCC keynote address as a “moment” (p. 297) in which to reckon such “seismic tremors” (p. 321) in the academy and the world at-large with the changing shape of the discipline.

Accepting that the growth and complexity of the field persisted and even accelerated after 1987—after this critical lurch through one particularly important phase transition—we should begin to understand that the proliferation of the discipline would spell big changes for research methods and specifically those strategies used to make sense of this daunting pile of disciplinary materials. North’s contention that “composition’s collective fund of knowledge is a very fragile entity” (p. 3) can, in light of this moment of criticality, be regarded as both challenge and prophesy. At the very least, it must be regarded as a harbinger of things to come.

With this necessarily abbreviated historical gloss, this brings us to the cusp of this book’s methodological intervention into the discipline. Why distant reading and thin description? Why now? We can begin to formulate a response to these questions by considering three contemporary challenges or quandaries.

First, the broadly defined data associated with the field of RCWS, though it has begun to take shape in recent years, remains generally piecemeal and impoverished. This first problem, then, keys on disciplinary data sets, their collection, review, circulation, and curation. We have, as of yet, few systematic approaches to the basic processes of aggregating detailed information about the people, places, and events that constitute the field and its ecology of activities. This is not to say that the field lacks any data whatsoever. The data exists

in pockets; it is intermittent, scattered, and only loosely assembled, often for very specific, temporary purposes. For distant reading and thin descriptive methods to bring about and sustain network sense, the systemic gathering and assembling of data must improve. Further, claims about appreciable trends or key moments, shifts, and “turns” in the field tend to be grounded in irreproducible and laborious data-gathering efforts, on the one hand, or in glancing impressions, which typically rely overmuch on idiosyncratic data and inductive logic, on the other.

Second, as do many other disciplines, RCWS continues to face a complex, expansive reading problem that bears direct relationship to disciplinary epistemology. Accepting that the field itself is constituted significantly by writing (MacDonald, 2010, p. 5; Prior, 1998, p. 27), the discipline piles up and expands at the edges. Writing of teaching lore, Wendy Bishop (1998) extended this expansion to include not only research-based and scholarly texts but also the guides, how-to, and advice books circulating about writing more generally: “More and more of this stuff is being written and published. Lore creates more lore. There’s some that’s good, some that’s bad. There’s some that’s a joy to read and some that’s slow going” (p. 226). This ongoing condition—the field’s perpetually being written—means that more disciplinary material is generated than any one person reading by conventional strategies alone could reasonably handle. Specialization is to credit, in part, for this burgeoning, and specialization carries with it hazards of *homophily bias*—the condition observed in networks where small clusters of like-minded people partition themselves off in an echo chamber and tend to proliferate in-group assent. Scholarly materials are produced and circulated in niche journals, both in print and online, as well as in a number of less formal venues. What we need and what distant reading and thin descriptive methods provide are devices suited to supporting those scholars in the field who desire to maintain a generalist’s wherewithal—whether out of a sense of professional responsibility or a commitment to intellectual acumen. Both for materials with immediate, direct relevance to the work of the field and for materials that mix and blend, hybrid-like and multimodal as well as inter- and sub-disciplinarily, distant reading and thin descriptive methods offer a practical, viable accessory to claim-making about disciplinaryity that is either too cursory and inductive to be theoretically viable or too labor-intensive to be sustained, much less reproducible.

Third, the field has sponsored numerous, ongoing attempts to chronicle its continuing emergence, and these attempts have relied primarily on ethnographic approaches to disciplinography. Scholars and researchers will continue to write the field into existence, often drawing on local knowledge and experience (often at the spatial order of program or institution or the tempo-

ral order of appointment or career) to underscore their impressions of what it means to conduct this work with some understanding of the apparatus of disciplinarity, and yet these small-world, inductive reports ought to be reconciled with broader manifestations of disciplinary conditions. Additionally, we need not re-invent the data associated with this broader order of disciplinarity each and every time we wish to comment on it. Distant reading and thin descriptive methods make it possible, in other words, to corroborate one account of the discipline with other selections of disciplinary materials. Because the discipline is sufficiently complex that no one vantage point can claim an omnipotent, ascendant view of its totality, we must not rely not on the local accounts alone but broaden out from the local accounts, re-associating them with the other perspectives on the ongoing, ever-shifting terrain.⁴

These three quandaries—data sets, a reading problem, and appropriate methods, although I have only sketched them briefly, catalyze what I will refer to through the book as the *internal problematic of disciplinarity*. I adopt the phrase “internal problematic” from Moretti (2007), who claimed that distant reading methods “enrich” the “internal problematic” of literary history (p. 2)—that is, a need to slow down, to take into account a larger record of materials than canonical forces typically allow, and to strengthen connections where alternatives to conventional criticism, such as distant reading and thin description, make such strengthening possible. The internal problematic of RCWS is considerably more complex than the three main concerns I have outlined above. Still, the phrase resonates with the pragmatic and theoretical spirits in which this pursuit is presented here as an intervention—as it calls for network sense and, to a modest degree, enacts correctives to these three quandaries.

Data-Mining and Visualization Methods for Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies

Late in the fall of 2005, John Unsworth stood before an audience of scholars in the humanities and library sciences where he presented the Lyman Award Lecture, “New Methods for Humanities Research.” In his lecture, Un-

4 This tracing of associations may never quite bring us to a total sense of the field, but it does match with what I describe as network sense: the epistemological standpoint that accepts as viable, suggestive forms of knowledge these abstract visual models produced by distant reading and thin descriptive methods. Network sense is highly compatible with a contextualist worldview (such as that elaborated in Phelps’s [1991] *Composition as a Human Science*) and with an ambient rhetoric (such as that elaborated by Thomas Rickert [2004] in his article, “In the House of Doing: Rhetoric and the Kairos of Ambience”); the tracing of associations can, relative to this framework, be understood as an instrument harmonious with the priorities of contextualism or ambient rhetorics.

Unsworth argued that humanities scholars had, since the mid-1980s, witnessed a resurgence of research methods, including data mining, which he claimed complicate the sense in which humanities research has ordinarily been used to describe “the work of an individual, work that is preparatory to writing, work that results in the publication of a book” (p. 4). Unsworth acknowledged that humanities researchers had yet to sort through the fullness of what data-mining initiatives could offer. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about “profoundly collaborative” interdisciplinary initiatives that had begun exploring data-mining methods as promising paths of inquiry in the humanities. More to the point of what data mining offered, Unsworth explained:

Data-mining delivers a new kind of evidence into the scene of reading, writing, and reflection, and although it is not easy to figure out sensible ways of applying this new research method (new, at least, to the humanities), doing so allows us to check our sense of the gestalt against the myriad details of the text, and sometimes in that process we will find our assumptions checked and altered, almost in the way that evidence sometimes alters assumptions in science. (p. 18)

Processes by which our assumptions are “checked and altered” ought to underscore the relevance of data-mining methods for RCWS, especially in such cases where something as abstract and unwieldy as a comprehensive discipline is invoked. Data mining, Unsworth pointed out, introduces more varied ways of working with texts, more highly differentiated ways of handling text-related problems. A decade later, data mining has aided researchers in understanding texts differently and in such a way that we are able to reconcile these forms of evidence, “arriv[ing] at a deeper sense of what we already know” (p. 17) and potentially leading to greater awareness of patterns that may or may not have been apprehensible to us before (e.g., see Drucker, 2010; Jockers, 2013; Moretti, 2013).

Unsworth (2005) articulated, as well, some of the ways data-mining initiatives stand apart from usual efforts to catalogue texts so that they are indexed in stable databases, such as search engines. When using databases developed for the purposes of searching digitized materials,

we bring specific queries to collections of text and get back (more or less useful) answers to those queries; by contrast the goal of data-mining (including text-mining) is to produce new knowledge by exposing similarities or differences, clustering or dispersal, co-occurrence and trends. (p. 7)

In RCWS, CompPile is perhaps the best-known example of a disci-

pline-specific “search-and-retrieval” system, and while it is an adequate database for users who want to enter an author’s name and get a listing of all recorded scholarship associated with that name, CompPile is not, in itself, a system that does the sort of data mining modeled in this book, nor, I would argue, does it “produce new knowledge” in quite the way Unsworth described.

Unsworth’s leading example of a data-mining project in the humanities was NORA, a two-year collaborative research venture involving more than 17 researchers at multiple universities between 2004 and 2006. According to Unsworth, who delivered his 2005 address at the mid-point of NORA’s two-year grant, “the goal of the [NORA] project is to produce text-mining software for discovering, visualizing, and exploring significant patterns across large collections of full-text humanities resources from existing digital libraries and scholarly projects” (p. 7). Within this research cooperative, one representative application of their work can be found in the Java tool written by a Maryland graduate student that “weighted searches across multiple [Emily Dickinson] poems, so that it would be easy to see the poems in which erotic terminology, once identified, seemed to cluster” (p. 13). Data mining, at least in this case, worked at the problem of collectively visualizing semantic associations on a specific theme across the entire Dickinson corpus.

Following NORA’s culmination in 2006, the project merged with related projects at a number of other universities and renewed its mission under the acronym MONK, which stands for “Metadata Offer New Knowledge.” MONK expanded to involve 32 researchers and scholars at 7 North American universities, and by all indications their work will continue to focus on data-mining software designed to visualize patterns in large-scale humanities corpora, many of which tend to align with literary studies. NORA, and its successor MONK, offer formidable examples of the sort of data-mining work that potentially “delivers a new kind of evidence into the scene of reading, writing, and reflection” (Unsworth, 2005, p. 18). And although this project takes as its primary objects of study scholarly data sets related to RCWS rather than the poetic works of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, or William Blake, NORA and MONK are noteworthy for the “new methods” they initiated, new methods involving data mining and visualization with considerable parallels to the distant reading and thin description demonstrated in Chapters Three through Five of this book.

Distant Reading and Thin Description: Orienting Methods

This book builds on Moretti’s distant reading combined with Heather Love’s thin description as orienting methods that respond distinctively to the in-

ternal problematic of disciplinarity in RCWS—a three-part problematic, as I sketched previously, constituted by

1. inadequate (i.e., partial and unsystematic) collections of data related to the field,
2. a reading problem in which relevant materials are produced at a pace far exceeding anyone's ability to keep up with them by conventional reading strategies alone (specialization is but one inevitable by-product of this condition), and
3. the persistence of disciplinary accounts that either rely on dubious, idiosyncratic evidence for making claims about the field or employ exceedingly laborious methods for surveying the field as to be at once impractical and irreproducible.

Distant reading and thin description allow us to pursue lines of inquiry related to the discipline at-large in ways distinctive from what has been done before.

Distant Reading

Franco Moretti first expressed the phrase *distant reading* in his 2000 *New Left Review* essay “Conjectures in World Literature.” Moretti was concerned with means of comparing, historicizing, and apprehending the large-scale phenomenon to differentiate patterns spanning something as complex and sprawling as national literatures, while comparing these sub-categories (and the social histories wrapped up with them) in relationship to world (larger scope) and local (smaller scope) literatures. The intensive labor of such a monumental task is among the leading justifications Moretti offered as rationale for distant reading. Moretti drew a comparison between the aims of distant reading and a slogan credited to French social historian Marc Bloch: “years of analysis for a day of synthesis” (qtd. in Moretti, 2000, para. 8). The phrase underscores a radical shift in scale from something broad and inclusive to something comparably reduced. Among the problems with traditional textual analysis, Moretti noted, was the conventionalized practice of contextualizing a scholarly argument or literary critique by surveying sample after sample of text (albeit by presenting mere slivers of quotation, paraphrase, and summary) that are sufficient to represent the voluminous texts themselves. According to Moretti, much scholarly reading and writing of this variety is already *distant* in that it is filtered and synthesized by others—the concentration of years of reading into mere paragraphs or maybe a page. Distant reading names an alternative to the common practice of writing a literature review, an alternative Moretti accepted as heretical (also, I would argue, *heuristic*, in

fitting with Young, Becker, and Pike's [1970] term for negotiating strictly rule-bound and free-ranging rhetorics). Moretti (2000) wrote of distant reading as a "little pact with the devil: we already know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them" (para. 10). Moretti continued:

Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it's precisely this 'poverty' that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more. (para. 10)

Germinated with distant reading methods are data-mining and visualization methods that can be used to inquire into emerging shapes and patterns in an academic discipline; these, too, offer visually intensive "conditions of knowledge." A sense of the field unfolds from these practices in reduction and simplification, of quantification and aggregation that, by way of these methods, amplifies patterns in textual and extra-textual metadata (e.g., word counts, citation frequencies, and geolocate indicators, among others). Distant reading imposes granularity on the "infinitely rich" object of study. The "disappearance" of the text—one of the more prominent points of critique among skeptics of Moretti's work—is only temporary. It is a deliberate, selective maneuver that admits a broadened context for the work itself, putting the text at a different scale so that relationships may be explored. Moretti's methodology simply challenges us to accept that texts need not be read *exclusively* by the default method in English studies (one text, at the scale of what can be held in the hand) but that there is insight to be gained in differential readerly scales, scales that support inquiry into patterns produced across the largest collection of texts available. With the momentary disappearance is a re-appearance of the text (and also traditional ways of reading), but now the devices for understanding the text become plural and multifaceted, expanding by the treatments Moretti introduced.

Only in recent years, first with the 2007 publication of *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* and later with *Distant Reading* in 2013, has Moretti's work on distant reading become more prominent, particularly in English Studies. Both books advance Moretti's thinking about the

production of abstract visual models in conjunction with data-mining and distant reading methods. *Graphs, Maps, Trees* was particularly influential on the work that follows. It delivered examples of distant reading but also offered a strange invitation, arguing implicitly for the ways similar processes might assist efforts to work with disciplinary data sets to explore patterns that, if they do not in themselves constitute disciplinarity, certainly offer a highly suggestive complement to existing efforts to chart and chronicle the emergence and maturation of RCWS. Moretti has been studying the sociology of literary forms for his entire scholarly career—a thread both noted and extended by Heather Love in her theorizing of *thin description*.

For example, Moretti (2005) worked through related questions in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, a collection of essays on literary criticism, historiography, genre, and form. He began that book's introduction with an unmistakable invocation of rhetoric. Drawing on the Burkean concept of identification, Moretti explained his interest in the observable relationship between form and "division" (p. 3), a thoroughly social matter concerned also with association and re-association. Rhetoricians have long examined the capacities of discourse to foster unity and division through identification and disidentification, generating senses of belonging, shared purpose, and consensus. I mention this way in which Moretti's work from its earliest presentation has been inflected with rhetorical principles because, although he is a scholar of literary form, he recognized that form is deeply entangled with rhetorical principles and even co-constitutive of sociality (of people and things, beyond community to network, the mobilization of a collective). He refers to the proliferation of forms as a "system of associated commonplaces" (p. 5) and as "doxai" (p. 3), which are significant indicators of consensus—the mobilization of group identification that, even while riddled with and rattled by divisive tendencies, congregates around some shared activity or interest. Moretti explained, "It is no longer a question . . . of contrasting rhetorical (or ideological) 'consent' with aesthetic 'dissent', but of recognizing that there are different moments in the development of every system of consent, and above all different ways of furthering it" (p. 8). For Moretti, he is concerned with literary historiography and forms of mass literature as the systems of consent; these systems coalesce in the novel as canonical, as definitional, as popular, and so on.

I am interested in a different system of consent: the field of RCWS as it has matured since 1987, growing in size, number, and complexity in the intervening years, and built from a fund of materials and knowledge Stephen North (1987) characterized as "a fragile entity" (p. 290). A variety of forms are relevant to this line of inquiry, but the primary form I will consider is the scholarly article—manuscripts published in *College Composition and Communication* over a 25-year period, in addition to a handful of contemporary

data sets from conference locations, consortia, and an international survey. A modest collection, in the grand scheme of things, but nevertheless a suggestive beginning point for using distant reading and thin descriptive methods to engage and further provoke insights into disciplinarity.

Distant reading intentionally varies the level of detail at which readers ordinarily engage with texts. It begins with the collection and selection of text-based data (e.g., words and phrases, citations, time stamps, and geolocations), which are then re-made, often with the assistance of computational processes, into abstract visual models. In Moretti's (2013) research, the distant reading models elucidated patterns that had been difficult to apprehend because of the magnitude of materials under consideration. Graphical representations, therefore, help to clarify the large collections derived by data- and text-mining processes. Data appropriate to distant reading come in many forms, but they are typically textual. From rudimentary counts of things, such as the number of articles published in a given journal over a specific number of years, to those data sets that are not so self-evident or easy to collect, like the keyword confluences of large corpora of texts over time, distant reading names a methodology interested in the pursuit of granularity that elucidates patterns. Counting journal articles and selected attributes, laborious though it may be, can be accomplished manually (it is no less valuable for this reason, of course). But because of the enormity of the task, distant reading is most often a hybrid methodology that thoughtfully merges automatic, computational processes with the agency of the researcher whose inquiry gives shape to the project. This means that much of the data collected and produced in accordance with distant reading relies upon computer-aided aggregation and reassembly. But distant reading is best understood as a hybrid orchestration of methods, neither wholly manual in their data-gathering techniques, nor entirely technical, automatic, or uniform from one application to the next.

Thin Description

The methodology forwarded in this book pairs distant reading with thin description. Thin description has been articulated by literary theorist Heather Love as a recuperative hermeneutics that calls for humanities scholars to reconsider the value of first impressions and descriptions of texts. In "Close Reading and Thin Description," Love (2013) noted the sweeping reception of Clifford Geertz's (1977) thick description, calling attention to the ways it provided a bridge between text-interpretive hermeneutics and social anthropology by framing cultures as texts best read by immersed participant-observers.

Love (2013) argued convincingly that the warm reception of thick description has operated since the mid-1970s as a variety of depth fetishism whereby interpreting deeply and more deeply still stands as the hallmark of rigorous engagement with any variety of objects of analysis, from literary texts to discourse communities. Thin description, however, interrupts this general narrative with a reminder that something of value is overlooked in the frenzy over thickness, depth, and closeness.

Love (2013) re-evaluated Clifford Geertz's use of a "turtles all the way down" methodology to loosen the association of thinness with behaviorism and functionalism. As Love pointed out, "turtles all the way down" looms as a ready, stalwart, antifoundationalist maxim. It gradually ascends to commonplace status, and as it does so, it risks skewing empirical inquiry in the human and social sciences toward unending plumbings of ever-deeper depths, ever richer richnesses. Love wrote,

Formulas such as . . . 'it is turtles all the way down' suggest that there is no bottom slice, or at least not one that can be distinguished from the upper layers of the sandwich. Geertz's attack was aimed at traditional empiricism, the habit of thought that tendentiously identified the bottom slice as the 'factual basis' of reality. (p. 409)

While Geertz's introduction of thick description to anthropology was meant as a timely corrective of interpretation over observation, Love (2013) suggested about "surface reading" that "it is possible to translate the concept into Geertz's terms: what can we learn by looking very carefully at the topmost turtle?" (p. 412). Turned toward questions of disciplinary emergence and formation—as well as to the material basis for disciplinarity itself, which, according to Paul Prior (1998) is "centered around texts, around the literate activities of reading and writing" (p. 27)—this book pursues a comparable question: Can we begin with noticing and describing first the topmost turtle and thereby become familiar with the turtle heap as an interconnected, networked phenomenon? The pairing of distant reading and thin description offers a flexible methodological framework within which to attempt to conduct this inquiry.

Heather Love theorized *thin description* with only glancing reference to Moretti's distant reading, though her framing provided a valuable counterpart to distant reading, especially when they are paired as a methodological basis for the data-visual work that I argue is vital for contemporary disciplinography as well as for fostering a network sense of the expanding field. Thin description names Love's attempt to refocus literary studies on the

positive epistemological gains located in empirical noticing, reconcilable sensory experiences, and techniques for sampling, selection, and reduction. Such a refocusing complicates and complements disciplinary gravitation in literary studies toward deep reading and immersive ethnographic methodologies that seek to *textualize* experience, or to regard complex, worldly activity and interaction as *text-like*. Like Moretti, Love focused her methodology on the centrality of texts as well as on particular attitudes toward texts and the kinds of work worth doing with them. However, Love's thin description moved beyond the normative epistemology in literary and cultural studies that has cemented around Geertz's thick description as a way of reading culture *qua* text. Love (2013) argued for a different mindset that resists taking thin description for granted, noting as exigency and corrective that Geertz-influenced methods have "tended to overlook the importance . . . of thin description" (p. 403).

Love advanced arguments for thin description as an interest in what textual-materiality can tell us about a phenomenon rooted in texts but not necessarily beholden to language-based interpretation alone—impression-encounters, glances, and what Erving Goffman (1974) called *strips*, intentionally narrowed selections of interaction that facilitate analysis. Another way to think about this, according to Love (2013), is to "reverse the process of textualization that Geertz describes" (p. 430). This sort of move by a researcher is useful for managing scope and for contextualizing interactions; it seeks to postpone deep-destination plumbings of hermeneutical depth and investments of meaning beyond meaning *en abyme* (i.e., bottomlessly) to instead inventory what is observable. Given that her methodology has circulated in literary journals and with an audience of literary and cultural studies scholars in mind, Love's case for thin description primarily set out to navigate literary studies debates concerning the value of close reading, although she does so with the aim of counterbalancing any assumption that close reading and thick description are, unto themselves, superior to alternative engagements with objects of study. Thin description insists on the value of other ways of knowing, that, although reductive, establish first impressions and operate as important sites of initiation for further inquiry. As a literary scholar, Love's arguments are invested primarily in urging reconsideration of an empirical research tradition and its "range of potentially useful tools" (p. 219) in service of reading.

While this brief account on thin description situates Love's work in the context of her scholarship on the subject, perhaps the clearest handle on thin description is how it contributes a perspective on data visualization and graphical modeling known as *thinning practices*. The text falls away; the data falls away; and, in its place, a gloss stands in. Thinning practices,

or synecdochal techniques, name a set of substitutive operations in which a right-sized (usually reduced, smaller) surrogate stands in for a more complex whole. Thin description aptly names Love's theoretical argument for humanities scholars and particularly those in literary studies to recognize the epistemological force of such practices.

Representing Distant and Thin Through Visual Epistemologies

The interdependence of distant reading, thin description, and abstract visual models necessitates a more rigorous conception of visuality appropriate to the rhetoricity of the data visualizations they work together to inform. Johanna Drucker's (2010, 2014) theorization of *graphesis* is a significant ally to Moretti's and Love's efforts and also to the data-mining methods Unsworth identified in his 2005 address. Drucker (2010) set up *graphesis* as a point of convergence that effectively middles the tendencies toward visualization (a *mathesis* that predominates in quantitative sciences) and art (an *aesthesis* that predominates in the arts). *Graphesis* is highly compatible with efforts to render abstract visual models that refashion massive collections of data for the humanities—compatible in the sense that Drucker's approach is centrally concerned with “the study of visual epistemology as a dynamic, subjective process” (p. 21).

In Drucker's 2010 work on *graphesis*, she emphasized a hybrid and multidisciplinary orientation to visual epistemology. Rather than assuming the “cultural authority of objectivity” (p. 3), *graphesis* works simply by “defining entities and their relations” (p. 19) in such a way that might enable us to trace associations and patterns among concepts without diminishing the interplay of interests, data, and aesthetics. According to Drucker, “*Graphesis* is premised on the idea that an image, like a text, is an aesthetic provocation, a field of potentialities, in which a viewer intervenes. Knowledge is not transferred, revealed, or perceived, but is created through a dynamic process” (p. 29). Unlike those approaches to data visualization that treat the visual mode of presentation as neutral, objective, or purely rational, Drucker's work on *graphesis* pushes us to reconcile visual models with the interests they serve and with the design choices that have gone into their making. In short, *graphesis* resituates data visualization and visual modeling in the wheelhouse of rhetoric, thereby making such abstracting practices more responsible because they are now understood to be *motivated and performative*.

With the provocations articulated by Unsworth (viz., data mining), the methodological demonstrations presented by Moretti (viz., distant reading) and Love (viz., thin description), and the theorization of visual epistemology

offered by Drucker (viz., graphesis), a groundwork is in place to apply these methods to disciplinary data sets and corpora.

Network Sense: Continuations Toward Self-Understanding of a Discipline

On what basis can we articulate an idea of composition as a discipline? (Phelps, 1991, p. 41)

The knotted relationship between distant reading and thin description methods and close reading surfaces in work by Moretti and Love, and as such, it warrants direct acknowledgement when adopting these methods. The parallels can perhaps best be addressed by turning to a pair of articles from the 2006 *College English* symposium on “What Should College English Studies Be?”: one on close reading by Don Bialostosky and another on networks and new media by Jeff Rice. Read in combination, a merger formed between them, and we find another way of accounting not only for the limited distinctions between close reading, distant reading, and thin description, but we also see yet another example of how distant reading methods are inventive and generative as well as what such methods, by abstracting, concretely produce. Bialostosky makes his brief contribution to the symposium as someone whom we might identify as a cautionary advocate of close reading. In response to the question asked in his piece, “Should College English Studies be Close Reading?,” Bialostosky offered a heavily qualified “yes.” With this affirmative response, he explained, “I want instead to open a space for considering alternatives to New Critical close reading by marking out, without naming, a pedagogical space where we teach productive attentiveness to literary texts” (p. 113). Is this a space within which distant reading might gain further justificatory hold? Perhaps so. The chances for this happening improve once we accept (as, most assuredly, not everyone will) that distant reading methods promote and even insist upon a “productive attentiveness to . . . texts” (p. 113). The removal of “literary” here is necessary to assert rhetoric and composition’s more expansive interest in writing and not exclusively literary texts. The adoption of Moretti’s methods is admittedly selective in this regard. I am bringing along what I find in his methodology to be most usable and useful while also letting certain other aspects fall away (e.g., his application of evolutionary biology and his focal interest in literary genres). Bialostosky’s contribution to the symposium, like the others, has a distinctive pedagogical flavor; his response, like Rice’s, implied that the invitation to address “What Should College English Studies Be?” will be answered in the classroom. I address the applicability of distant

reading and thin description methods to pedagogy later; however, here I invoke Bialostosky because his elaboration of close reading scrapes the concept (both as methodology and as pedagogy) free from some of the residual New Critical burdens that have accumulated over the years. Judging by the spirit of Bialostosky's argument, he would agree that close reading, distant reading, and thin description, are only helpful if they are reconciled with the question of what reading practices we consider important enough to teach.

For distant reading and thin description to be viewed as inventive and generative, as heuristic, we must read Bialostosky's expansion of close reading in tandem with Jeff Rice's (2006) contribution to the symposium. Rice answered "new media" and, more precisely, aspects of networks as connective, associative phenomenon proliferating throughout the digital, informational domains. "College English has not yet imagined or perceived itself as a network" (p. 128), Rice wrote. The ways "networks alter current understandings and rhetorical output still need unpacking and further study" (p. 132), Rice cited N. Katherine Hayles's suggestion of linking as an emerging form of expression and William Burroughs's anticipation of "the rise of the network as rhetoric" (p. 130), as we "reimagine English studies' efforts to generate a 21st century focus" (p. 130). Rice identified a key moment in the edited collection *Composition in the Twenty-First Century*, where David Bartholomae explained composition's focus on "the space on the page and what it might mean to do work there and not somewhere else" (qtd in Rice, 2006, p. 130). Rice emphasized Bartholomae's differentiation between the page and the "not somewhere else," suggesting that, in fact, new media and networks compel us toward the *somewhere else*, "the open space constructed out of connections where multiple writers engaging within multiple ideas in multiple media at multiple moments function" (p. 130). Rice's "writing as network" breaks the fixity of established knowledge typical in much of English studies (p. 129–131) and allows a space where distant reading and thin description make it possible for us to create a network sense of disciplinary.

The combined aims of Bialostosky and Rice together form a keen lens through which distant reading and thin description become recognizable not strictly as a text-focused methodology but also an approach to unwieldy, systemic complexity of disciplinarity, of which texts are only a small part. Their pairing is especially suggestive for their shared concern in an "open space" that, for Bialostosky, offered a revision of close reading that frames it as productive attention and, for Rice, asserted the value in "somewhere else" in the rhetorical networks proliferating via digital practices of reading and writing. Distant reading and thin description render these net-

worked “somewhere else’s” traceable, conferring on large-scale data sets a granularity that makes ties observable and renders patterns visible as well as makes new forms of knowledge unavailable to us by other means. This is the way in which these methods are inventive, generative, and productive, doing something more than renewing the interpretation of existing texts. Distant reading and thin description methods and the abstract visual models produced in the second half of this project catalyze what I call *network sense*—an epistemological capacity for discerning those patterns entangled with a broad set of forces running through and beyond the text, involving matters of semantic associations, historical orientations, locations, and relationships. Distant reading and thin description advance network sense; network sense finds tangible coherence in complexity, making available a means of elucidating these discursive and extra-discursive “somewhere else’s” without compromising their magnitude or downplaying their abundance. As I have claimed, distant reading and thin description afford us a contemporary methodology that, by promoting network sense, makes it possible for us to come at the internal problematic of RCWS differently than has been done before.

Up to this point, I have tried to show clear, persuasive, and informative paths leading toward a point of convergence for the two primary scholarly phenomena that motivate this book. On the one hand, this is a project interested in disciplinography; on the other hand, it is a project that has an interest in advancing new and emerging methods for engaging with the internal problematic of RCWS. Now that we have arrived at a nexus—the intersection of distant reading and thin description methods and disciplinography—there remains the task of examining more closely what happens once we are here. Some familiarity with attempts to write the discipline is helpful in this endeavor and will become evident in the final section of this opening chapter, where I offer more about the reading problem and look at two recent scholarly efforts to write the discipline, one by Wendy Hesford and another by Richard Fulkerson.

Epitomes of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies

Rhetoric and composition/writing studies has grown in size and complexity since its modern emergence, rapidly folding in on itself more deeply through compound specialization and also branching in constant recombination where it meets with other disciplinary interests and formations. This point has been well established. Compared with 20 or 40 years ago, today there is more scholarship to read in the form of journal articles, monographs, and edited collections; there are more forums within which disciplinary concerns are discussed, from national and regional conferences to

blogs and listservs. At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that while disciplinographic efforts have persisted since the moment of criticality I locate for RCWS in 1987, many of the more recent attempts to chronicle the discipline have grown ever more acute in the slice of the field with which they deal. Contemporary disciplinography, in other words, increasingly works in epitomes—bibliocentric slices: summaries, abridgements, and representative cases, many of which are paired with inductive methods or justified tacitly by felt sense⁵ or many years of “living among,” as was the case for North. Looking at two examples will further illustrate certain constraints impinging on contemporary disciplinography while also demonstrating how distant reading and thin description methods can assist in creating devices for sizing up the field *differently* through multiple, selectable layers of aggregable data and metadata, that is, through thinning practices that underscore disciplinary knowledge as network sense. These examples will also shed light on the lack of field-wide data and metadata as one ongoing challenge for the field.

Before working directly with the two cases that cap this chapter, the concept of *epitomes* deserves more extensive elaboration. The term is roughly synonymous with the representative anecdote; epitomes selectively sample from something large, unwieldy, and complex; identifying an epitome involves *a cut* (epi-), an act at once of incorporation and neglect (i.e., look at *this*, but not all of *that*). Epitomes are thin descriptions in that they do away with the bulkiness of the minute record so that they can amplify; they require separation as a function of weeding out in the interest of illustration. The very concept of epitome refers both to the cut and to a book (-tome). As a paragraph-long abstract is to a scholarly article, an epitome is to a book-length tract. These synecdochal techniques condense, yielding a tree from the dense forest. Epitomes, like other synecdochal techniques, have their limitations; they are dangerous for their neatness and partiality, and therefore they must be read back through a more comprehensive record—as comprehensive as is available.

First, consider Wendy Hesford’s May 2006 *PMLA* article, “Global Turns and Cautions in Rhetoric and Composition Studies,” a 10-page bibliographic essay that makes use of 102 citations. Hesford traced the *topoi* of “global studies and transnational cultural studies” back through scholarship of the field, in the interest of showing how “scholars in rhetoric and composition studies are meaningfully contributing to conversations about the pressures of globalization and the consequences of the new United States national-

5 *Felt sense* is a bodily epistemology informed by intuition and by wide-ranging, combinatory sensory experiences. I define it further in Chapter 6, informed by Sondra Perl and others. But here I am letting the concept stand as-is from my own thinking about felt sense.

ism” (p. 788). Hesford concluded, based on this sizable selection of scholarly materials, that the field is turning to “national public rhetoric in the United States (Lazare) and its reception by global audiences (Booth)” (p. 797). Corroborating Hesford’s conclusions, or even countering or complicating them, would require not only reading the heap of texts listed in her works cited; it would require us to reconcile the proposed turn with any number of other disciplinary indicators, such as the scholarship *not* overtly about globalization and nationalism (an examination that would wonder *what other turns are there?*—a matter I will address in Chapter Three); the dissertations produced by PhDs in the field in a given year (Miller, 2014); as well as graduate course descriptions, job advertisements, and any number of other archives, many of which have not been systematically collected or, as of yet, studied. Furthermore, Hesford’s bibliographic essay is relatively (i.e., recognizably) conventional for the way it works primarily with scholarly materials as an indication of some *epitomic* characteristic. This is a case where disciplinography and bibliography run parallel courses; a disciplinary turn, therefore, can be traced through the scholarship alone.

Hesford’s summation is impressive for the scope of the materials she draws upon, yet she makes it clear that the article is forged from reading she did not purely of her own choice and volition but rather as a member of a book award committee. In a footnote, Hesford (2006) noted that “the major archive for this project consists of nearly 40 books nominated for the 2005 Conference on College Composition and Communication Outstanding Book Award” (p. 797). Hesford continued in the note to explain,

Additionally, I reference several initiatives that provide critical opportunities for thinking through what the global turn means in terms of research methods, pedagogy, and theory building in rhetoric and composition studies. This self-imposed constraint has made feasible a critical bibliographic essay of this length, which serves as a barometer of the pressures of globalization on the changing profession. (p. 797)

Read almost 40 books, reconcile them with another 60 or so sources you already know, trace a theme across the full collection, and identify it as a barometer for a turn in the field—I offer this as a simplistic, though not unfair, sketch of Hesford’s methods. We can (and *do*) take Hesford at her word. It helps knowing Hesford’s well-deserved scholarly reputation and having read many of the books on her list, which affirms what her synthesis of them suggests. More than settling whether this synthesis is plausible, however, I am interested here in matching up what Hesford *did* with what distant reading and thin description methods *do*.

With this in mind, looking again at Hesford's work, we see that its success depended upon an intensely laborious method of collecting, reading, and reducing a heap of texts into a handful of abridgments. To reproduce her findings, one would first have to read all her sources—again, sources gathered for her and others on the book award committee by the more or less arbitrary criteria of one year's worth of scholarly monographs. Revisiting the sources alone would not be sufficient, however, because any persistent thematic pattern would then have to be reconciled with other knowledge about the field and its reach. Let me put it another way: Could distant reading and thin description methods have led us to these same conclusions? If, in addition, for these nearly 40 books, we had tag clouds, citation frequency graphs, and maps suggestive of, say, geographical interest, would the same conclusions be available to us? These questions are not easy to answer without carrying out the project (perhaps this is an undertaking worth pursuing down the line). But Hesford's brief bibliographic essay is striking for how much thin description it already does without presenting any visual models. For instance, much of her collection of resources falls away; it disappears! In place of full texts, we have quotations, titles, and some analytical stitching. How far removed is this approach from the "pact with the devil" that Moretti (perhaps jokingly) identified in 2000 with distant reading, that this is "one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more" (para. 10)? The purpose of the bibliographic essay is much like Moretti's: the substitution of the default, full-text experience of reading for one's self with another variety of reading, via someone else's gloss, a variation on not reading. Yet, the genre of the bibliographic essay does not attract nearly so vocal charges of heresy as does Moretti's distant reading.

The resemblance I am suggesting between distant reading, thin description, and bibliographic work is not unique to Hesford's *PMLA* essay, epitomic though her essay is. Bibliographic essays extrapolate patterns from large, complex collections. Importantly, the practice of producing bibliographies shifted in the late 1980s. Noted rhetoric and composition bibliographer Richard Larson last published his annual "Selected Bibliography of Scholarship on Composition and Rhetoric" in the October 1988 issue of *College Composition and Communication* (CCC). It was a bibliography accounting for 82 works from the year 1987. Following several of the indicators I described earlier in this chapter, it stands to reason that the scope of the field was thereafter insurmountable relative to any one person's attempt to account *comprehensively* for the published record in any annual cycle. Like disciplinographies subsequent to 1987, bibliographic essays, including Hesford's, have narrowed, settling into identifiable niches and specializations. Contemporary disciplinographers have resorted to tactics other than the

tracing of themes across a sampling of scholarly publications, although this method is highly effective and well recognized in most academic fields. The difficulty with bibliographic essays is that as the body of works increases, so does the intensity of the task and the degree of selectivity of the sample. It is exceedingly laborious to extrapolate patterns from such a deep well of textual material. But this not the only approach to identifying turns in the field.

A second, far more inductive method is on display in Richard Fulkerson's "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," which appeared in the June 2005 issue of *CCC*. Fulkerson has written article-length surveys of the discipline approximately every 10 years since 1979, when *CCC* published his essay, "Four Philosophies of Composition," bridging pragmatism, mimeticism, expressivism, and objectivism with rhetoric and composition. Fulkerson's early work proceeded like so many of the early readings of the discipline in the 1980s. In "Composition Theory in the Eighties," Fulkerson (1990) revisited his "Four Philosophies" piece and concluding that consensus had started to coalesce around a "rhetorical axiology" (p. 411). As rhetoric became a shared value in the field, those viable philosophies from a decade earlier—expressivism, mimeticism, and formalism—waned. Continuing his assessment of decade-long trends in the field, Fulkerson's (2005) "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century" raises difficult questions about the adequacy of his evidence for perceiving disunity in the field and the "new theory wars" (a phrase he borrowed from Scott McLemee in *Inside Higher Ed* [2003]). Fulkerson claimed "that we have diverged again. Within the scholarship, we currently have three alternative axiologies (theories of value): the newest one, 'the social' or 'social-construction' view, which values critical cultural analysis; an expressive one; and a multifaceted rhetorical one" (p. 655). Fulkerson proceeded with "mapping Comp-landia," staking out the conceptual terrain suggestive of certain formations in the field (p. 655).

Fulkerson's chief resources for identifying the field's disconcerting pattern of divergence in the new millennium were two tables of content of edited collections on the teaching of writing: one table from *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, published in 1980; another table from *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, published in 2001. With a cursory comparison of the two tables, Fulkerson found that the volume published in 2001 includes four titles whose related themes were not represented in the 1980 collection.

The major difference shows up in chapters 5 to 8 of the new volume. They have no parallels in the older one. These four chapters represent variations of the major new area of

scholarly interest in composition as we begin the 21st century, critical/cultural studies (CCS), showing the impact of postmodernism, critical/cultural studies, and British cultural studies. (p. 657)

With this as the identified catalyst for his argument about the field's compounding disunity, Fulkerson proceeded with an analysis of the four axiologies he perceived to be drawing the field asunder: current/traditional rhetoric, expressivism, critical/cultural studies, and procedural rhetoric. Fulkerson was most highly critical of the critical/cultural studies thread in the more recent pedagogy collection because he saw it as aligned not with the teaching of writing but with the political pursuit of liberation; the current-traditional axiology, on the other hand, was treated as a given and was not subject to critique in any extended, explicit way, like the others were. Fulkerson's *modus operandi* is clarified through his critique; his own critical emphasis on CCS raises questions about the ease with which these two tables of content (an alarmingly small sample of evidence for such wide-reaching claims about the field's disunity) came to light. The dubious nature of his set-up with the tables of content is further stressed by his neglect of technology—a matter which, although slight in its representation in the 2001 collection (with just one essay), was not mentioned at all in the 1980 collection—and one which can hardly be overlooked in anything attempting to account for field-wide axiological turns in the 21st century.

Where Hesford's bibliographic essay gives us what she identified metaphorically as a barometer, Fulkerson's article, by his own framing, gave us a map of Comp-landia, a survey pervaded with spatial and navigational phrases. Yet, even though Fulkerson attributed his map to the two tables of content, his approach is implicated with claims based largely (if not solely) on more than 30 years of accumulated experience in the field. Keeping with the mapping metaphor, this presents a problem with *ground-truthing*, the practice by which cartographers (especially digital cartographers) venture into the terrain itself in search of discordance between the map and the landscape. Beyond the principle of validation, it is a dynamic practice, one that accepts the constant transformation, fluidity, and adaptiveness of the space being represented. Should a newcomer to the field pick up both edited collections identified by Fulkerson, the experience of reading them might or might not match up with his conclusions because of the inferences he drew from more than 30 years of experience. In fact, Fulkerson acknowledged that the density of the bibliographic essays in the 2001 volume "frequently makes daunting reading even for old hands" (p. 657). Fulkerson's map of Comp-landia is drawn not so much from a shared (or sharable)

perspective on the field as it is from local, tacit knowledge, an epitome of composition derived from the accumulated experience of “living among”—much like North’s.

The connection with North is more than capricious. Fulkerson concludes his article with direct reference to North’s (1987) *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, as follows:

In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, Stephen North asserted that ‘composition faces a peculiar methodological paradox: its communities cannot get along well enough to live with one another, and yet they seem unlikely to survive [. . .] without one another’ (369). I suggest the paradox is now not just methodological, but axiological, pedagogical, and processual. If you think this is a dangerous situation, as North and I do, then early in the twentieth-first [sic] century, composition studies is in for a bumpy ride. (p. 681)

Here, the temporal gap—an interlude collapsed into “North and I”—deserves careful consideration. North’s claims about methodological pluralism, after all, were presented nearly 20 years before Fulkerson’s claims about the trends toward disunity and fragmentation in the field. On many levels, Fulkerson’s speculative conclusion—whether it is right or not that RCWS “is in for a bumpy ride”—affirms what I proposed at the beginning of this chapter: With the growing complexity of the field past the moment of criticality I locate in 1987, our methods for apprehending large-scale patterns in the scholarly materials of the discipline have fallen behind and become cumbersome. What were once adequate methods for sizing up the discipline (i.e., North’s 10 years of “living among”) are, these 20 years later, insufficient for grasping the complexity in such a sprawling, widespread phenomenon. Even though Fulkerson located a suggestive artifact of the field’s turn in the comparison between the two tables of content, his method is by and large experience-based and inductive, drawing on 20 more years of “living among” than North had when he wrote his landmark monograph. Whether or not he is right—and he very well may be right that deep discord surrounding good writing, writing processes, and pedagogy pervade the discipline—the combination of his two forms of evidence nevertheless present us with no viable means for corroborating his claims except by inference, comparing them helter-skelter with our own perceptions of the field—an especially compromised undertaking for readers of his work who do not share his many years of experience in the field. Respondents (Chidsey Dickson, Jaime Mejía, Jeffrey Zorn, and Patricia Harkin) to his essay in the June 2006 “Interchanges” section of *CCC* make this concern explicit: Jaime Me-

jía, for instance, questioned whether Fulkerson's commentary "realistically reflect[s] 'the composition landscape'" (p. 744); Jeffrey Zorn took exception as well, noting, "None of [Fulkerson's framework] informs a moment of what I do in any of my writing classes, but I'm used to that" (p. 751). The interchange is an outpouring of local, immediate experience that contrasts with Fulkerson's own limited view of a complex, cosmopolitan domain.

Two approaches to contemporary disciplinography, then, and two variations on how the field is known have been presented here: one by heavily sampling the scholarship in a given year as Hesford has done, and the other by comparing tables of content from edited collections at 20 years' removal and then underscoring selected differences with first-hand, experiential knowledge as Fulkerson has done. One is daunting because of the labor intensity of the task of reading and synthesizing more than 40 books and related materials into a 10-page manuscript; the other is challenging because inductive, inferential conclusions about something so abstract as the field can, even with 30 years of experience, be at best partial and localized. Neither of the pre-conditions to knowledge-claims about the field offered by Hesford or Fulkerson is easily reproduced except by reading extensively and exhaustively or by working for many years in the field.

If I have seemed up to this point critical of their work that has not been my intention. My aim here has been to identify and describe the methods that back each of their disciplinographic accounts—accounts that present firm conclusions about turns in the field of RCWS. The works by Hesford and Fulkerson should crystallize the immensity of the internal problematic of the field in the terms I presented earlier—that field-wide data and metadata are impoverished, that claim-making about the field tends to be problematic in direct proportion to the degree such claims are (a) highly specialized (drawing on niche knowledge) or (b) highly inductive (drawing on experiential knowledge), and that (c) the unceasing proliferation of disciplinary materials makes it ever more difficult to be a generalist reader. The internal problematic—which, no doubt, extends beyond the three points of emphasis I have included here—is intractable from the complex, multifarious, dynamic organization that is the field.

Can we know such an abstract agglomeration of activities and things except by the means modeled by Hesford and Fulkerson? If, as I believe, disciplinary understanding and invention is foremost a matter of network sense—that is, of apprehending traceable connections among people, places, concepts, and values—then distant-thin methods and the abstract visual models produced by these means have much to offer. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how such methods might make a formidable intervention into the epitomic practices of writing the discipline. The field's

rising complexity has outpaced the conventional techniques available to account for it. Efforts must be expanded to render disciplinarity traceable—to envision the field as networked phenomena, phenomena that can be found in the imaged patterns that emerge over long periods of time and vast collections of materials.